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ISU economists' report puts face on state's immigrant population

By: Kathy Hanson , Special to The Tribune



Swenson and colleague Liesl Eathington studied representative samples of more than 16,000 Iowans from the 2006 U.S. Census to make projections on Iowa's foreign and native-born populations. What they found puts a new face on Iowa's immigrants and dispels some stereotypes about who they are, where they're from and the kinds of jobs they take. Swenson and Eathington estimate there were more than 79,000 foreign-born persons in Iowa in 2006, representing nearly 5 percent of the state's 1.6 million people. Of the sample, less than half were born in Latin American countries (47 percent). Asian-born persons comprised 31 percent, followed by 11 percent from Europe and 7 percent from Africa.

Although the study found 35.3 percent of the foreign-born population hadn't completed high school (more than four times higher than the state's native population), it showed 28.8 percent had attained bachelors or advanced degrees, a rate about 4 percent higher than native Iowans.

And at that level, education was tied to professional employment leading to salaries averaging 33 percent more than native Iowans' salaries.

Swenson said foreign-born workers contribute at both ends of the economic spectrum, projecting that foreign-born workers accounted for \$5.47 billion of the state's \$121.35 billion Gross Domestic Product in 2006, or 4.5 percent of the state total.

"It's not just people coming to take production jobs at meat-packing plants or work in construction, although such jobs are important to Iowa's economy," he said. "We're attracting a very diverse pool of foreign-born talent to meet job demands here in the state of Iowa."

Swenson said the report also overturns misconceptions that foreign-born professionals are taking jobs from Iowans

and driving down wages.

"It's just not true that foreign-born people are taking skilled jobs from Iowans," he said. "We have a lot of trouble keeping and attracting some of the critical skilled professionals this state needs in education, in science, in engineering and in medicine."

At ISU, foreign-born students and faculty put a face on the challenge of educating a new generation equipped to meet the demands of a global economy.

Sheng Kai Chia, a sophomore from Koala Lumpur, Malaysia majoring in economics, entered the United States to study at ISU only one month ago.

"I feel the pressure to complete my degree in two years," he said. "When I'm done, I must return to my country to complete obligations for my government scholarship, but then I'm qualified to compete for jobs anywhere in the world."

Chia said he's unofficially doubling up his economics degree with studies in hotel management.

John Patience, associate professor of animal science, came to Ames from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, at about the same time as Chia. Patience said he was recruited from the private sector, and he's looking forward to doing research and outreach for ISU in the pork industry.

No stranger to diversity in his home province, Patience said he understands his role in developing domestic agriculture and helping rural Iowans keep up with changing technologies and economic trends in a globally competitive marketplace.

"I bring new knowledge and a fresh perspective," he said. "I've never been made to feel like I was encroaching on some native Iowan's job territory. People seem genuinely glad I'm here, and this goes from the university community all the way to my neighborhood. In fact, I've already received my first plate of cookies from a neighbor."

But there's more work to be done to prevent harm to Iowa's economy for those industries vulnerable to federal immigration raids, Swenson said, referencing two major raids on Iowa meat-packing plants within the last two years, one at the Swift plant in Marshalltown and the other at Agriprocessors Inc. in Postville.

Although meat-packing jobs represent just a fraction of those filled by foreign-born workers, employers face stiff challenges in recruiting authorized workers to fill those jobs and keep production moving.

"Studies show native rural Iowans leave those jobs as soon as they can, especially when they gain education and skills to get new ones," Swenson said.

Swenson said the study didn't track workers' authorization status.

"I'm just simply looking at their participation," he said, "but if that (meat-packing) industry is impacted, it has multiplied consequences all the way through the animal-feeding and crop-producing sectors. So we have much more of a linkage to this issue of what do we do about our unauthorized workers than many other places do. And I think Iowans don't understand just how important that linkage is."

The complete report, which Swenson prepared for a presentation he's making at a statewide National Association for the Advancement of Colored People conference in Des Moines on Friday, Sept. 19, is available online at www.econ.iastate.edu.

